

5 March 1968

MEMORANDUM FOR: [REDACTED]

SUBJECT : Press Report of Administration Consideration of a Mining Program and Damage to Soviet Merchant Ships in North Vietnamese Waters

1. An article appearing in the Washington Post on 27 April 1967 deals at some length with official administration consideration of a mining program of Haiphong as a means of closing the Port to foreign shipping. The complete text of the article, "Haiphong Harbor Eyed as Next Bombing Target" is presented in enclosure A. Reference is made to a "new detailed study" being given "very heavy discussion" within the Joint Chiefs of Staff and under review at the White House and the State Department. The remaining portion of the article focuses on the diplomatic and military considerations of such an action by the United States.

2. The article appeared at the start of the intensified bombing of North Vietnam during the latter part of April. New targets being struck at that time included the two power plants and cement plant in Haiphong.

3. Three separate incidents have occurred involving alledged damage to Soviet merchant ships in North Vietnamese waters by United States aircraft -- the Turkestan, Mikhail Frunze, and the Pereslavyl Zaleskiy on 2 June 1967, 29 June 1967, and 4 January 1968 respectively. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] News reporting of these three incidents was not particularly extensive and consisted primarily of reports of official protests, replies by the State Department and follow-up reports of the specific charges.

4. No direct mention of a mining program in relation to these incidents was found in the material searched on or around the dates given above. Major news events closely preceeding or following reports of damage to the Soviet vessels may in part explain the lack of any significant editorial comment in the press at that time. The attack on the Turkestan, 2 June 1967, was overshadowed by the commencement of the Israeli war on 5 June. The Glassboro conference and meeting between President Johnson and Premier Kosygin began on 24 June 1967 and received major press coverage both during and after the incident involving the Mikhail Frunze on 29 June. The latest incident, on 4 January 1968 with the Pereslavyl Zaleskiy, occurred at the time of preparations for the visit to Cambodia by Ambassador Chester Bowles and was subsequently overshadowed by news reports of his mission.

Enclosure A

Text of Washington Post Article by Chalmers M. Roberts and George C. Wilson on 27 April 1967 entitled "Haiphong Harbor Eyed As Next Bombing Target."

Top Johnson administration officials are engaged in a new detailed study of whether to bomb Haiphong harbor in order to halt the flow into North Vietnam of aid from Communist countries.

This top-level review is strongly focused on the question of how to close the Port without bringing on a major confrontation with the Soviet Union, a chief supplier of war goods to the North Vietnamese.

The issue of bombing or possibly mining the harbor is under "very heavy discussion" within the Joint Chiefs of Staff, according to official sources. But the subject is also under intensive review at the White House and State Department.

On all sides, however, it is emphasized that thus far President Johnson has barred any such action, the big exception he made to the list of targets which he approved for bombing several weeks ago.

But as one State Department official put it, "There is a tremendous amount of soul searching" now going on within the Administration about Haiphong Harbor.

By some accounts, one source of pressure on the Administration to close the harbor comes from some influential Senators who reportedly have indicated they will oppose sending more troops to South Vietnam unless the harbor is sealed.

Such congressional pressure is credited in part with persuading the President to approve the recent bombing raids on a steel mill, cement plants, power plants and airfields. A chemical works in Vietri, which North Vietnam started so proudly in 1959, is a likely future target.

The Haiphong port is the biggest facility in North Vietnam spared from the bombing. Exactly how vital it is as a supply route for the North Vietnamese is a matter of internal Administration dispute.

The problem facing the President is two-fold: diplomatic and military.

It is agreed on all sides that if a Soviet ship were sunk, or seriously damaged, the Soviet Union would react strongly. Most officials think Moscow would freeze - at least temporarily - such presidential projects as the treaty to bar the spread of nuclear weapons and the agreement to halt the deployment of rival multibillion dollar antiballistic missile systems.

Moscow also very likely would hold up ratification of the Soviet-American consular agreement and the space treaty, both recently approved by the US Senate. The Moscow-Washington airline agreement, new in its final stages of negotiation, also might be shelved.

Soviet military response could take the form of more and newer weapons, including aircraft and battlefield missiles, or even volunteers - pilots, for example - if Hanoi agreed.

Some officials argue that closing the port would make Hanoi more dependent on Peking than on Moscow though the critical Soviet military items, aircraft and SAM missiles, now are said to be shipped overland rather than by sea. The hope in Washington remains that some day the Soviet Union will have a key role in peace negotiations.

The Joint Chiefs study, in part, is designed to discover a way to close the harbor without hitting Soviet or other Communist bloc ships. Officials note that due to the silting in the Red River there have been times when the dockside was clear of ships because they were awaiting high tides.

There also has been an investigation of the legal ownership of Communist bloc goods shipped to North Vietnam. They would be considered Vietnamese property once they were off-loaded on to lighters down river as already is the practice with much of the supplies now coming into Haiphong.

From the military viewpoint here are the leading schemes now under review.

Bombing: Dry cargo docks could be hit when ships are not in port. But the bigger question is whether taking out the docks would be sufficient. Opponents say the Vietnamese could use more lighters and land cargo on any number of beaches or at smaller ports.

Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara earlier this year argued against such a move in a Senate committee hearing. He noted that taking out the oil storage facilities in the harbor area had "very little effect on the import level" and added that "I think the same thing would be true if we took out the cargo docks in Haiphong for dry cargo."

Mining: Some Navy leaders favor dropping mines by parachute at night with delayed fuses. The mines could be set to become live in three days. Ships could be warned in the meantime to stay out of Haiphong. Such mines might be aimed at the lighters alone. These pressure mines can be set to go off when a certain size ship passes over them.

Blockade: Dredges or other large ships could be sunk in the channels, a World War II practice.

Blockade: The Cuban missile crisis technique of challenging incoming ships on the high seas, generally considered an act of war and totally unlikely in the current situation.

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